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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RABAT 000105

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SUBJECT: MOROCCANS SEE HOPE IN OBAMA AND HIS MIDEAST PEACE EFFORTS

REF: RABAT 0098

Classified By: CDA Robert P. Jackson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Moroccans are broadly upbeat about the new administration. An MFA official said her government expected to engage closely with the administration, offering that Morocco could play a role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Popular response to President Obama's inauguration and Al-Arabiya interview has been very positive, echoing the tone in the media (reftel). Interlocutors praised the quick deployment of Senator Mitchell and the President's emphasis on respect and engagement with Muslims. Representatives of political parties and a range of everyday contacts were hopeful, a sentiment somewhat attenuated by continuing concerns over Gaza. Some Islamist-oriented politicians were also positive, but several claimed a "wait and see approach."

Youth are optimistic and knowledgeable about Obama. One contact told us that the administration's approach "could really hurt radicals' influence among young people." End summary.

Rabat Celebrates Inauguration

¶2. (UN) Reflecting the general interest in the U.S. presidential transition and heightened interest in President Obama, a large crowd including Prime Minister Abbas El Fassi's right hand man, Minister-Delegate for Economic and General Affairs Nizar Baraka, a Vice-President of Parliament, representatives from the Prime Minister's office, our key interlocutor on the Millennium Challenge Compact, and the Secretary General of the Ministry of Agriculture attended an celebration of American democracy on Inauguration Day hosted by the USAID Mission Director. The resident directors of the World Bank and United Nations were also in attendance. Viewing President Obama take the oath of office and a bi-partisan video showing previous president's inaugural speeches, guests echoed the widespread Moroccan sentiment that the new administration will find a receptive audience for outreach in Morocco and the broader Middle East.

Rabat Eager to Engage New Administration

¶3. (C) MFA North America Division Chief Wassane Zailachi praised the tone set by President Obama and his appointment of Senator Mitchell, adding that Morocco would be happy to play a role in the peace process, if needed. "We are well known for doing this discreetly," she stated. She noted that the President had mentioned Morocco as one of the countries he might visit and asked about his travel plans. (Comment: We understand that Moroccans in the U.S., who often maintain some contact with government representatives, have been

campaigning for President Obama to choose Morocco to deliver a much anticipated speech he indicated he would make early in his administration from a Muslim country. For several years, Zailachi, in effect our desk officer, has been our most helpful practical contact at the MFA. End comment.)

¶4. (SBU) Echoing these remarks, MFA Humanitarian and Social Division Chief Abdelmounaim El Farouq said the President's decision to give his first international interview to a Muslim audience and his rapid appointment of Senator Mitchell as an envoy to the Middle East illustrate his commitment to improving relations with the Muslim world. He praised Mitchell's experience and reputation for being even-handed.

Politicians Excited, But Islamists "Wait and See"

¶5. (SBU) Representatives of two of Morocco's main political parties, Istiqlal and the National Rally of Independents (RNI), told us they appreciated the administration's emphasis on "respectfulness over divisiveness, listening over dictating, and engagement over militarism." Many Moroccans perceive the President to be honest and serious but are skeptical that U.S. policy toward the Middle East will change. Contacts in the Islamist-oriented Party of Justice and Development (PJD) have been upbeat, but their original enthusiasm has been dampened by the fighting in Gaza. Hassan Bennajeh, a spokesman for the semi-legal Islamist-inspired Justice and Good Works Organization (JCO), explained that he was taking a "wait and see" attitude to the Obama administration, because, on issues like Gaza and Israel, the

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U.S. travels a well worn path that transcends political parties or individual presidents.

Obama is Human

¶6. (SBU) Applauding President Obama for extending a hand of friendship to the Muslim world, Egyptian Economic Counselor Tarek Dahroug argued that Muslim countries must "meet Obama halfway" and stop thinking of him as a messiah who will solve their problems. "Obama has extended his hand, now it is time for us to take it by proposing our own solutions," he said. He noted that expectations for the new President among Moroccans and in Arab capitals are unrealistically high and quipped, "They think he looks like us, so he must think like us." He praised Rabat for actively reaching out to the new administration, something he attributed to the Berber strategy of leaving all avenues open, and criticized other Muslim countries for following the "traditional Arab" method of waiting passively for him to do more.

Obama Could Undercut Radicals' Influence on Youth

¶7. (SBU) Dr. Abdallah Saaf, Director of the Center for Social Science Research and Studies, i.e., a prominent Rabat "think tank," enumerated a list of President Obama's positive gestures since Inauguration Day, including "using his middle name, Hussein, at the swearing-in," calling Palestinian Authority Leader Abbas, appointing Senator Mitchell, giving the Al-Arabiya interview, and promising to make an address from a Muslim capital. He noted that while he and his colleagues are closely and optimistically tracking these developments, many Moroccans remain in a somewhat skeptical "wait and see" mode. Saaf noted that Moroccan youth are attracted to Obama by the same attributes that appeal to young Americans, and are poised to respond positively. He reflected that, if events continue moving in a positive direction, "this could really hurt the radicals' influence."

¶8. (UN) During a trip to the somewhat remote southeastern towns of Ouarzazate and Zagora, Public Affairs Office staff reported high levels of both knowledge and enthusiasm about Obama among Moroccan youth. A class of secondary school English students knew that Obama was the first African-American U.S. President, that he attended a very good university (Oxford, they thought), and knew details of his family. Teenagers selling dates by the side of the road in a very small town near Zagora, once they realized they were talking to an American, brought up Obama and gave him a big thumbs up. One boy said, "Obama has a good head and a good heart, and he is able to change mentalities." They said they watch him every day on TV.

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<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/rabat>

Jackson